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ABSTRACT

The goals outlined in the California Language Arts Framework (1987) include a call for Language Arts instruction that promotes a love of reading through a sense of personal fulfillment, a sense of effectiveness through which students acquire a range of lifelong learning strategies that foster full participation in the world of work and the access to knowledge in a democratic society. It is with these fundamental goals and principles for language learning that the task of selecting appropriate materials and teaching strategies for classroom use must be undertaken. Many basal reading programs totally ignore the criteria of connecting classroom experiences with real life in order to create responsible lifelong learners. Materials and activities which reflect the real world and whose use can be extended into the daily lives of children after they leave the classroom are and should be included in the daily instructional practices of literacy classrooms. Good readers make meaning from text through risk-taking and hypothesis-making. Good reading instruction is that which builds on students' background knowledge, the extent of which can be determined through meaningful interaction between teachers and students. Funding currently set aside for the purchase of basal readers should be used to (1) promote a more holistic method of instruction; (2) implement staff development at school sites; and (3) purchase trade books and other authentic sources of reading. (RS)

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Towards a Balanced Literacy Instruction: Understanding Reading Skills within a Whole Language Paradigm

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ED 398 528

The goals outlined in the current California English Language Arts Framework (1987) include a call for Language Arts instruction that promotes a love of reading through a sense of personal fulfillment, a sense of effectiveness through which students acquire a range of lifelong learning strategies that fosters full participation in the world of work and the access to knowledge in our democratic society (p.1-3). It is with these fundamental goals and principles for language learning that the task of selecting appropriate materials and teaching strategies for classroom use must be undertaken.

Despite the recent backlash to whole language and the widespread misconceptions regarding the teaching of phonics and basic skills within a whole language context, the goals and principles of developing lifelong and participatory readers and citizens remain the most compelling overriding call to literacy instruction in the United States today. Presentations and claims made by the publishers of the literacy series adopted in the last few years have basically neglected the fit between whole language and skills, to the detriment of children. Lack of effective and long-term professional development for teachers have undermined the potential of an integrated reading and language program, whereby interpretations of whole language in classrooms have been practices:

using only whole class models instead of grouping and individualization when necessary;

ignoring phonetic instruction in the early grades, which is called for within the context

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of authentic reading experiences;

include the separation of reading and writing within the language learning experience;

the general all or nothing perspective which results in a public opinion and views that education is on a perpetual pendulum of pedagogic fads.

It is the intention of this writer to provide an alternative viewpoint as to what constitutes effective reading and writing instruction, based on the most current research on literacy instruction. Given this information concerning the research and expertise of literacy authorities in the nation, I will then provide an outline of my recommendations as to appropriate materials and instructional strategies to the boards of education and other policy makers in the literacy arena.

Reading Policies

To adopt or not to adopt: Questions for publishers

In light of the aforementioned goals of language arts instruction delineated in the California English Language Arts Framework (1987), a comparison can begin to be made as to whether or not the strategies and techniques that form the basis of the basal series under consideration for adoption are necessary and sufficient methods for literacy instruction. Publishers generally declare that both criteria are met through their basal series, given their claims as to effectiveness, yet the definition and proof of effectiveness remain to be specified.

The fact that students adapt their reading and writing strategies in order to meet the

teachers' criteria and expectations can be clearly justified through both the literature (Nelson, 1990) and through visits to any elementary or secondary classroom. It is easily observed that students perform according to their perceived notions of their teachers' requirements for the task at hand, whether it is a skills worksheet or a 5 part essay. In Nelson's study on college freshmen's interpretations of writing tasks , it was found that the rewards (or the aversion to punishments) were central to students' responses on their writing tasks. This study exemplifies the traditional classroom attitude, exhibited across grade levels, of the evaluation student performance based on teacher (and basal-generated) determined assignments. The extent to which the students perceive any actual benefit or enjoyment of the task, not to mention linking the task to any real life situation remains to be seen. From the teachers' (and the publisher's) viewpoint, students complete their work and perform adequately (usually determined by the distribution of the bell curve). Therefore, traditional skill instruction, which can be easily graded in this manner, can be judged to be effective from the standpoint that some students (or even most students) can be slotted into the scale and will fall into the appropriate percentage groups.

Effective instruction utilizing skill and drill practice of phonics and comprehension or writing strategies can be easily justified by the publishers of those type of programs if completion of the task, the distribution of grades and the actual use of the materials in the classroom by the teacher are the criteria utilized for determining effectiveness. However, the more global criteria of connecting the classroom experiences with real life in order to create responsible life-long learners, as recommended by the Framework and other experts, are totally ignored by many programs. This connection between authenticity and reading

instruction is the basic problem with the current literacy controversy that we are facing.

The definition of an effective program is not one in which the isolation of the components of reading and writing are central, and exclusive to reading instruction. This stance ignores not only the potential within each student, but also ignores the guidelines and recommendations made by current research (Harste, 1989) and government policy (L.A. Framework, 1987). The extent to which there is conflict between the paradigms of reading and writing instruction is not the aim of this discussion, rather the goal is to analyze the type of literacy instruction which most capitalizes on the potential of each student. It appears that the principle evidence against the use of the basal series under discussion is the ultimate disregard for that potential. Existing within the skills paradigm reflected in the basal is the assumption of a *singular* instructional methods and materials utilized.

Returning to the California English Language Arts Framework, (here after referred to as the L.A. Framework) "... the most important key to a successful program is a motivated and knowledgeable teacher who finds ways to lead students to love reading and to be effective language users (p. 15). In order to foster this love of reading, which ultimately fulfills all to the goals of the L.A. Framework, students must be given the opportunity to actually read. Research conducted on what good readers do and how they got to be good readers(as measured by tests of reading comprehension, Krashen, 1988) has determined that those students report that they read outside of school, have silent sustained reading programs in school and have access to a variety of reading materials. Materials and activities which reflect the real world and whose use can be extended into the lives of children *after they leave the classroom* are and should be included in the daily instructional practices of literacy classrooms. Fundamental to

literacy instruction is the inclusion of authentic reading materials and writing activities, which include the use of literature, trade books, comic books, newspapers and encouraging writing through journals, story writing, etc.

A closer look at what good readers do and what nurtures good reading behaviors shows that good readers are engaged making meaning from the text through risk-taking and hypothesis-making (Edelsky, Altwerger & Flores, 1991). The process of making meaning from reading materials is one which is encouraged very early in the lives of learners through involvement with the world of print which is all around them. Young learners should be encouraged to make connections, " guesses" and to draw meaning at all stages of reading development. Similarly, writing instruction occurs through encouraging students to use the knowledge of language that they already have to develop communication through this medium.

In addition, good reading instruction is that which builds on students' background knowledge, the extent of which can be determined through meaningful interaction between teachers and students and between students (Edelsky, Altwerger & Flores, 1991). The emphasis on the importance of social interaction between teachers and students is one that is typically ignored through the use of basal readers; often the task at hand is not to engage in meaningful discussion concerning the reading or writing, rather it is one of completing a certain number of pages or books within the series. Utilizing this approach, the teacher often is rarely able to determine the extent of prior knowledge of the student; on the contrary, it is assumed that children come to the learning situation with inadequate or deficient backgrounds.

It is precisely this deficit approach to both teachers and students that drives the publishers of such series to produce texts that are viewed as "teacher-proof" (Goodman,

Shannon, Freeman & Murphy, 1987). The traditional use of basal series in education has served in the trend to "deprofessionalize" teaching within a society where the production of basals is a huge profit-making business. The concept that teachers will not be able to teach and students will not be able to learn without a predetermined set of objectives organized within a scope and sequence agenda produces a general disparaging scenario within which neither group is valued for their contribution or inherent potential.

Recommendations for Literacy Policy-Makers and School Boards

Given understandings concerning the claims made regarding the disposition of the publisher concerning the process and materials necessary for reading instruction, namely that effective reading cannot be measured solely by the production of a range of scores on a bell curve. If we keep in mind that the goal is to encourage a love of reading that in turn will be carried beyond the classroom doors, then not only will we as educators and concerned citizens meet the guidelines set forth in the L.A. Framework, we will also broaden the view of literacy and the instructional attitudes and practices that holds fast to the conviction both children and teachers are capable and have the potential to mediate their own learning.

It is with these convictions in mind that the following recommendations are provided for the instruction of reading and writing in this school district:

I. That the funding currently set aside for the purchase of basal readers be utilized to also promote a more holistic method of instruction.

II. The six fundamental principles of reading and writing instruction which are encompassed by this holistic paradigm are:

1. Language (literacy) classes should be learner centered (with the teacher viewed as a potential learner as well);

2. Language is best learned when kept whole;

3. Language instruction should employ all four modes--listening, speaking, reading and writing(which are also delineated in the L.A. Framework);

4. Language in the classroom should be meaningful and functional;

5. Language is learned through social interaction; and

6. Language is learned when teachers have faith in learners.

III. The funds should be utilized to implement staff development at school site; the primary goal of the staff development should center around the use of authentic reading and writing experiences in classrooms. Expert consultants who espouse the holistic viewpoint can be contracted on long-term bases, the purpose being to assist in the development of authentic language use in classrooms over time. An integral component of professional development should be how to incorporate appropriate reading skills and strategies within the holistic paradigm.

IV. Funds should also be utilized to purchase trade books and other authentic sources of reading including literature, and newspapers.

Conclusion

Previous concerns over the acquisition of form, as espoused by those who advocate the

use of basal readers within the skills paradigm, detract from the potential, experiences and prior knowledge of both teachers and students. By promoting a move towards a positive rather than a deficit model of language instruction, we will be able to advance the cause of advocating a nation of readers that is the goal of the L.A. Framework.

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